The war on wolves
Lengthen the distance from endangered species to Ready, Aim, Fire.
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The predator is canny, relentless and swarms in killer packs. It lives and loves to hunt whatever it desires, typically dropping prey animals in their tracks. The predator attacks without warning, preferably giving victims no chance to defend themselves. Unfortunately, it often pays little heed to whether it's driving those it kills toward extinction.

The predator we're discussing, of course, is homo sapiens, the species of human that for thousands of years has variously domesticated, admired and exterminated different types of wolves around much of planet Earth. This autumn that complex relationship, man and wolf, takes a lethal new turn in parts of the American Midwest: Wisconsin and Minnesota have scheduled wolf hunting seasons — even as animal welfare and wildlife groups seek legal interventions that would protect the vulnerable prey from the better-armed predator.

Four decades ago federal authorities rated gray wolves, this continent's most numerous variety, as endangered — but not before hunters and livestock growers reduced their numbers to several hundred in the 48 contiguous states. Today that population is about 6,000, plus a larger number in Alaska. The Obama administration has declared the gray wolf fully recovered; next week, Wyoming becomes the fifth state with a sizable wolf census to legalize hunts.

How could the feds tolerate the hunting of an ecologically important creature that, by the mid-1900s, was hunted almost to oblivion? "... if you look at the Endangered Species Act," U.S. Fish and Wildlife Director Dan Ashe explained to The Washington Post, "it's not an animal protection act. It's a law designed to prevent the extinction of a species."

That doesn't mean the rest of us have to accept bare-minimum-survival as the maximum indulgence we'll extend to a species that has been subject to so much irrational slaughter.

Step back and the pending hunts in Wisconsin and Minnesota come clearer into view: They're part of an evident if undeclared war on wolves that is accelerating — and growing more controversial. Scan newspaper websites from across the American West and you'll find frequent tussles as ranchers, farmers, lawmakers, judges and animal advocates debate the proper role of the wolf. Example:

On Thursday, federal appellate judges in Colorado heard arguments challenging a National Park Service decision to keep using human hunters — rather than simply introducing wolves — to limit the elk population in Rocky Mountain National Park; the elk can consume so much vegetation that other animals suffer. Before wolves were reintroduced to Yellowstone National Park in the mid-1990s, a surging elk census overbrowsed aspen trees and other vegetation at the expense of the park's beaver and bison.

The notion of killing wolves that have rebounded from near extinction is far more provocative. Idaho last winter let hunters kill 252 wolves; trappers killed another 123. International attention focused on a trapper named Josh Bransford. This play-by-play comes from an Idaho Statesman editorial, "One trapper's barbarism reflects badly on Idaho":

 

When Bransford happened on a wolf in a leghold trap, standing in a circle of blood-tinged snow, he did not put his prey out of its misery. At least not before he posed for a photo — while he smiled in the foreground, the wounded wolf standing in the background. The photo, posted temporarily on a trapping website, went viral on the Internet. And when it did, Fish and Game went on the defensive. The agency said Bransford had a permit and permission from the landowners and had taken a required class in wolf trapping. Posing for the photo, instead of killing a suffering animal, is a breach of protocol, but not a violation of the law.

To many of the humans who have all but displaced wolves on the American landscape, the animals occupy an inconvenient spectrum ranging from costly to dangerous. Wolves do prey on livestock, although some cattlemen exaggerate the toll. And while wolves rarely attack humans, those animals tend to be rabid. The upshot: In parts of Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan — a state that has not authorized hunts — the wolf has become a routine and accepted player in humanity's interaction with nature.

That's no reason to try to pet wolves. As it's no reason to again risk losing them.

Worldwide, wolves have two principal enemies — tigers and ... people. Strip away legislative and court efforts to diminish or protect gray wolves and you find a familiar collision of two forces: the desire of humans to control what they see as their environment, and potential extinction if wolf populations fall so low that disease could eradicate them.

The conflict pits people who would enjoy shooting wolves — think Sarah Palin, firing from an aircraft — against what a Montana wolf hunter interviewed on The Sportsman Channel called "a bunch of wingnut screwballs from wherever (telling) us how to manage wildlife."

We aren't anti-hunting. And we don't always agree with Defenders of Wildlife and others working to protect an animal that plays such an outsized role in nature's scheme. We do, though, wish Congress at least would lengthen the distance from endangered species to ready, aim, fire. Minnesota, where a hunt opens Nov. 3, plans to issue 6,000 licenses to enable the killing of 400 wolves.

We value those 400 wolves more than we do the personal enjoyment of those who want to kill the animals without even the saving grace of planning to eat them.

In the last century, Americans nearly exterminated one of its most ecologically valuable and majestic creatures. Ours will be a tamer, poorer nation if this century continues the slaughter.

 